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ABSTRACT

In recent years, scholarly and applied inquiry has addressed the importance of interpersonal communication patterns and problems in maximum security institutions for males. As a result of this research, the number of programs designed to improve the interpersonal effectiveness of prison inmates has increased dramatically. Research suggests that some dysfunctional and dangerous aspects of prison life may be amenable to programmatic intervention, such as the following: (1) the inappropriate communication styles that result from inmate backgrounds and the realities of institutional life; (2) the tendency of inmates to keep to themselves rather than identify appropriate opportunities for self disclosure, release of tension, and receipt of feedback; and (3) the inability to cope with the impact of institutional life on relationships with those outside the prison. However, few studies have directly addressed interpersonal communication in the maximum security prisons per se. Instead, most studies investigate related issues such as subcultural adaptations, stability of relationships with family members, and the psychological effect of imprisonment. In addition, there appears to be a lack of conclusive empirical validation of how investigators conceptualize inmate communication. There is an evident need for further research, programmatic interventions, and evaluations of specific programs. Seventy-eight footnotes are provided. (JD)

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PERSPECTIVES ON INMATE COMMUNICATION AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS IN THE MAXIMUM SECURITY PRISON

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ABSTRACT

Although contemporary penitentiaries place few restrictions on inmate communication, the nature of inmate interactions in maximum security institutions for males affects and reflects the social and physical qualities of the prison environment, as well as individual adaptations to prison life, the security of individuals who live and work in prison settings, and the eventual success of the ex-offender in the community. In discussing the importance of inmate communication patterns and problems at both the aggregate and the individual level, the authors review and integrate a large body of communication, psychological, sociological and criminological literature, extracting issues pertenant to communication per se.

PERSPECTIVES ON INMATE COMMUNICATION AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS IN THE MAXIMUM SECURITY PRISON

Since the construction of the Eastern Penitentiary in Pennsylvania and Auburn Prison in New York, structures viewed as prototypes of western penology, interpersonal communication in prisons has been an issue of utmost concern to practitioners and scholars. Built during the early 1800s, both facilities operationally espoused the reformative values of silence. The consistent enforcement of noncommunication endeavored to prevent further contamination of the inmate by his peers and to encourage introspection and penitence. Early observers of these penitentiaries[1] and some administrators,[2] however, were quick to observe that silence in its most austere form, solitary confinement, was far from ameliorative but rather conducive to illness and insanity. It took somewhat longer to learn that enforced silence, in almost any form, had little redemptive effect and warranted abandonment.[3]

Interpersonal communication within correctional institutions, nevertheless, continues to be an important issue. Although contemporary penitentiaries place few restrictions on inmate communication, the nature of inmate interactions tends to affect and reflect the social and physical qualities of the prison environment, as well as individual adaptation to prison life, the security of individuals who live and work in prison settings, and

the eventual success of the ex-offender in the community. In a more general sense, examination of the verbal and noverbal communication of inmates, or any other social group, offer essential insights into their cultures and social systems.[4] Inmates communicate in a manner that is symbolic of the unique attributes of their environment and their communication, in turn, impacts upon the quality of their environment. Interest in the communication of inmates also reflects concern for a variety of inadequate interpersonal styles that may affect prospects for success upon release, including: over-assertiveness, under-assertiveness, lack of empathy, poor listening skills, dependencies, an inability to discriminate between helpful and non helpful communication, and a lack of interpersonal sharing and self-disclosure. In response, the number of programs designed to improve the interpersonal effectiveness of prison inmates has increased dramatically in recent years.

Although few researchers have directly studied the interpersonal communication of inmates, scholarly and applied inquiry into tangentially related issues abounds. Such relevant efforts span sociological and psychological explorations of prison subcultural adaptations, numerous theoretical discourses, case studies, surveys, laboratory studies, clinical accounts of treatment programs, and longitudinal studies of the impact of institutional life on inmate attitudes, psychological states, and family relationships. The intent of this paper is to review this literature in the context of interpersonal communication. The

review examines the extent to which the notion of interpersonal communication offers a heuristic tool for understanding inmates and their environment and identifying appropriate areas for programmatic interventions.

To the communications scholar, the interactions between the environment, the culture, and the individual comprise the most relevant conceptual focus for this inquiry. These interactions and their effect on interpersonal communication involve a number of processes and factors, including: 1) perceptions that individuals form of their environment and of themselves in interaction with the environment;[5] 2) inner personalities and various psychological states;[6] 3) the impact of group language on group experiences;[7] and 4) individual and group adaptations to environments.[8]

This interrelationship is especially sensitive in institutions such as the prison. According to Leary, the impact of such institutions on the emotional climate effectively stifles collaborative relationships.[9] Thus, communication difficulties and inadequate interpersonal functioning reflect and in turn aggravate disturbances in one or more of the processes noted above. These and other issues pertenant to the interpersonal communication of prison inmates are discussed in the pages that follow. Generally, the following sections discuss aspects of prison life that relate to communication patterns and explore the impact of communication difficulties at the individual level.

Perceptions of the Total Institution

The prison, according to Goffman,[10] serves as a barrier to social intercourse. The impact of the physical environment in this regard seems unquestionable. Maximum security prisons are generally built in the isolated countryside, commanding and foreboding with high brick walls, windows barred with steel and literally miles of chain-linked fences and concertina wire. The sliding of heavy gates, the clashing locks, the somber facial expressions of the correctional staff and inmates all proclaim eloquently and wordlessly that this climate is not conducive to open communication. Perceptions that participants form of their environment, themselves, and of each other have a profound impact on their interpersonal relations;[11] one must expect the interpersonal situation of the prison and the communications therein to be affected adversely. Key to this observation is the issue of "metacommunication" or what communication says or symbolizes about communication.[12] Thus, stares, deliberately avoided interactions, violent expressions, and physically reinforced barriers to communication "communicate" as much as the specific content of a conversation.

Self perceptions are inevitably marred in this setting. From the symbolic interactionist perspective, individuals become aware of their own identity through a perpetual communication process; they are, in other words, in constant interaction with themselves

at the same time that that they are actually and symbolically interacting with others.[13] The individual in this environment, according to Goffman, has been "stripped" of the former sources of his self definition (e.g.,privacy, property, heterosexual relationships, and security) and assumes a new identity that is reflective of the "total institution".[14] The new self-identities ultimately bring new influences on both the interpersonal communication process and the environment.[15]

This process of communication and perception cannot ignore the influence of the conceptual focus of individual communicators which in some instances may be distorted by certain emotional (individually conditioned) and ideological (collectively conditioned) factors.[16] A number of inmate personality characteristics seem important to understanding the perception-communication interractions within prison populations. Most importantly, many were reared to espouse violent subcultural norms,[17] a factor that is clearly observable in the maximum security setting.[18] Violence is for many an ingrained personality characteristic as well as a coping strategy for living in prison. It is understood by all that violent reactions and threats are the most effective means of self protection. In reality, however, this understanding seriously escalates the level of institutional violence.[19] Observable inmate communication styles often demonstrate a lack of interpersonal concern. Inmates are thus recognized for their failure to show empathy and for their poor perspective on the

needs and feelings of others. This characteristic has been cited as a causal element in the etiology of their criminal careers.[20] Some maintain that empathy fails to develop in environments that afford limited opportunities for role-taking in social interactions that present diverse rather than familiar perspectives.[21]

In a cyclical manner, prison language patterns, in turn, have a profound impact on inmate perceptions of the prison. Indeed, according to Whorfian hypothesis, the soul of a people and the mind of a people are not only reflected by its language, but are inevitably shaped by it.[22] In this environment, however, language is dysfunctional. Thus, it both portrays and perpetuates a troubled way of life.

Adaptations and their Impact on Communication and Interpersonal Relationships in Prisons

It is Goffman's reasoning that "any group of persons -- prisoners, primitives, pilots, or patients -- develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable and normal once you get close to it..."[23] It is imperative to study this at the individual level as well, since individuals perceive and respond to similar environments in a differential manner.[24]

The earliest studies of inmate adaptations viewed their communication in the context of a prison subcultural normative

system. The inmate social system, according to these accounts, adheres to a code of loyalty that opposes the staff and formal rules of the institution.[25] In addition to taking a distinctive stand against the formal rules of the prison, the inmate culture evidences a language or argot that is functional to the prison and the problems encountered while living there.[26] Inmates adapting to this style are considered "prisonized".

According to Sykes, the most respected role that one can assume in this environment is that of "the real man."[27] The admired attributes of the "real man" pertain primarily to the manner in which he communicates. He responds to the stresses of prison life with dignity and composure, speaking slowly and deliberately, and showing no emotion. He "plays it cool" by displaying neither compliance nor defiance to prison officials or fellow inmates. He is his own confidant; no one is expected to give ear to his problems.

In contrast, Sykes portrays other inmates who by their communication styles have been relegated to less respected positions on the institutional social hierarchy. They include: 1) the "rat" who betrays his fellow inmates to prison officials; 2) the "center man" who identifies with the correctional staff, communicating mostly with them rather than with his fellow inmates; 3) the "merchant" who uses language primarily for manipulation and unfair personal gain; 4) the "punk" whose communication style is passive and inadequate to the task of preventing personal exploitation; and 5) the "ball buster" who,

neglecting any semblance of discretion, foolishly, blatantly, and often violently defies institutional authority.

Others have since debated the origins of the prison subculture and the notion of prisonization, essentially questioning whether these patterns are adaptations or pre-incarceration modes.[28] In addition, some have argued that the patterns cited by Sykes and others may vary on an individual level according to the self esteem of the prisoner[29] and the proximity to his release date[30] or on an organizational level according to the coerciveness of the environment.[31] There does appear to be some stability to Sykes' observations about the communication patterns of men in prison, however. More recent studies reveal a preference among adult male maximum security inmates for an independent coping style. Research conducted in Great Britian by Richards[32] and replicated in the United States by Flanagan,[33] for example, found that the majority of inmates adhered to the "real man" perspective in dealing with the problems of prison life. In response to the overwhelming majority of the problems considered, the majority of inmates believed it best to handle their problems by themselves rather than to address them to staff or fellow inmates. In addition, the second largest group in Richards' study indicated that they would discuss a problem with a relative or friend outside of the institution. The second largest group among the inmates studied by Flanagan (which nevertheless represented a distinct minority of the inmates) said that they would discuss some of their problems with fellow inmates.

However, they were more likely to offer this response to a problem relevant to prison routine than to a more personal deep-seated issue relevant to life either outside or inside the institution. Flanagan cited the reasons for not discussing problems with staff as follows: 1) a belief that one should not "cross the line"; 2) a fear of losing the respect of one's fellow inmates; and 3) a feeling that the correctional staff was generally not approachable. Those who believed that fellow inmates should not be consulted, offered such reasons as: 1) a desire to avoid burdening one's peers; 2) a belief that one has no friends per se in a prison--only "associates";and 3) a conviction that important things should be kept to oneself.[34]

This staunch independence as well as the tendency to adhere to the norms of the prison subculture appears to be somewhat unique to captive populations.[35] Most "total institutions",according to Goffman,[36] foster a dependency and personal ineffectiveness that most certainly affects interpersonal communication. Most notably, concentration camps[37] and mental hospitals[38] evidence a process referred to as deindividualism, institutionalization, social breakdown, or a tendency to identify with one's captors, to become dependent upon the institutional culture and to lose the self-sufficiency needed to survive outside of the institution.

In contrast, Wulbert suggests that prison inmates exhibit higher levels of self-esteem.[39] Research conducted by Chang and his associates furnishes support for this assertion. In this

study, inmates positioned themselves relatively high (fourth out of thirteen ranks) on a hierarchy of social roles that included priests, ministers, doctors,other people in general, students, inmates in general, lawyers, etc. Interestingly, the inmates positioned "inmates in general" at the lowest level of the hierarchy, showing an obvious lack of respect for their peers and an ability to define themselves in a respectable position apart from the inmate body.[40] The research conducted by Chang et al., Richards, and Flanagan also stresses the fact that interactions among prison inmates do not approximate friendship. Thus, while subcultural norms of loyalty may be present, they pertain primarily to a shared opposition to the formal authority of the institution in the absence of friendship bonds to fellow inmates.[41]

Descriptive accounts of how inmates communicate, however, should not be interpreted as indicative of their communication and interpersonal <u>needs</u>. Indeed, Toch´s data, interviews with 418 inmates in five maximum security institutions throughout New York State, tempers exaggerated adherence to the "real man" perspective. A substantial portion of the inmates interviewed evidenced environmental concerns relevant to a need to interact with others. These included concerns/desires for: 1)support or assistance in self-improvement efforts; 2)emotional feedback or relationships that furnish intimacy, empathy, and emotional sustenance; and 3) social stimulation, interaction, companionship and gregariousness.[42] It is important to stress that these

concerns were expressed to an interviewer who was not affiliated with the institution. Toch's research points to a gap between inmate communication needs, on the one hand, and their actual communication styles on the other. In this light, independent patterns described by Sykes, Richards, and Flanagan appear to represent a coping strategy rather than a mode that would be preferred in a less extreme setting.

Inmate Communications with the Outside

The observations noted above describe a rather stark interpersonal environment, suggesting that interpersonal communication between inmates and staff is kept to a distinct minimum while communication among inmates is often somewhat perfunctory. It is likely that the void caused by the distance that the inmate places between himself and other prisoners is filled by people outside of the institution---at least it is in the mind of the inmate. Both Flanagan and Richards found that the main problem indicated by the inmates studied was that they missed a specific person on the outside.[43]

Although thoughts of significant others on the outside, or occasional interactions with these people, may constitute the predominant coping strategy for dealing with prison life and reassuring the inmate that he is not alone, incarceration can shatter family and friendship bonds. Research pertaining to the stability of relationships with people on the outside, casts a

tragically ominous tone to this issue. Those who probably provide the most support and are a source of intimate communication, at least in the eyes of the inmate, often do not play this desperately needed role for long. Studies suggest that, for a substantial portion of inmates, relationships with spouses and girl friends deteriorate over time. Relationships with parents, however, seem somewhat more stable.[44] Inmates studied by Brodsky were unrealistically self-protective on this issue. Many did not acknowledge the deterioration of their relationships with people on the outside, claiming, instead, that they were involved in stable, meaningful relationships with others who were not affiliated with the institution.[45]

"Missing someone" while living in an environment that does not address that void is a communication issue that ought to be carefully assessed for its impact at the individual level. Generally, the need for intimacy is recognized as a fundamental need[46] that, when not met, has a noted impact on healthy mental states.[47] Indeed, studies of the impact of prisoners' isolation from families, and significant others offer clear evidence of damaging emotional and physical effects.[48]

Interpersonal Relations at the Individual Level: A Clinical Note

Given the nature of the prison interpersonal environment, it should be obvious that numerous interpersonal and communication

difficulties can be identified in prison settings. In an applied manner, this section explores the differential issue of specific communication difficulties affecting inmates. As earlier discussions suggest, many of these problems result from the prison environment; some represent ingrained habits or products of the childhood home and other preprison experiences; and some, of course, are the interaction of predispositions and the current environment. Inmates evidence symptoms of a wide array of distinct communication and interpersonal problems, including: over-assertiveness, under-assertiveness, institutional neurosis, absence of self-disclosure, lack of empathy, as well as technical speech and hearing disorders. Increasingly, these concerns are receiving the attention of prison treatment efforts.

Over-assertive inmates are certainly the most easily identified. In many instances, these individuals behave no differently in the prison setting than they would in the streets. The home environments of such inmates fostered a type of "action language" that conveys even the most innocuous thought in a violent manner. Such inappropriate interpersonal behavior begets more action language and is often the precursor of violent behavior.[49] Hans Toch's portrayal of these individuals is especially insightful:

> Violent men play violent games because their repertoire is restricted. Even when a violent person is aware of what he does, he rarely knows what he could do instead. In fact, such a man frequently assumes that violence is the only

means available to achieve his objectives.[50]

In the prison environment, monotony, external control, and especially the intrusion of personal space serve to amplify the violent behavioral outcomes of this personality characteristic.[51]

While some studies find prison inmates more over-assertive than non-prison inmates,[52] there are nevertheless numerous inmates who can be characterized as under-assertive. Concern for these individuals is equally appropriate.[53] Appreciation for the effects of decreased involvement with those on the outside, as well as the effects of life in a total institution, has led some to explore the extent to which prison inmates experience the "institutionalization","institutionalism", or "institutional neurosis"referred to in an earlier section of this article. All of these terms describe apathetic states, lack of motivation, a dependency on the institutional structure, and general deterioration. Although this phenomina does not appear to be as prevalent in prisoners as in mental hospitals, concentration camps, etc., it is present to some degree. Sapsford, for example, found significant changes in scores on the social introversion scale of the MMPI, as well as the acquisition of institutionalization traits among a small portion of the inmates in his study.[54] Moreover, laboratory studies of personality and autonomic reactions to stress among prison inmates show increased passivity, anxiety, and depressive-like autonomic reactions to be a by-product of coercive and stressful situations.[55] Certainly,the "institutionalized" inmate, the individual who

returns to the institution from parole sometimes claiming that he just "can't make it out there", is a familiar character to the prison environment and the penology literature.

Over-identification with the institution and its personnel, when present, appears to be a dysfunctional orientation. In research that classified inmates on prisonized vs. institutionalized dimensions, for example, Goodstein found that prisonized inmates experienced a better post-release adjustment than institutionalized inmates.[56] Such findings counter those suggesting that prisonization adversely affects chances of successful readjustment.[57] Goodstein asserts that inmates retain identity and control in the process of rejecting their captors; this, in turn, fosters autonomy upon release and results in a more successful reintegration into society.

Assertiveness patterns have an unquestionable bearing upon events in the institution and adjustments outside of the institution. In addition to their being less amenable to a successful post-release adjustment than the assertive inmate, inmates characterized as extremely under-assertive are more likely to fall prey to the exploitation of their fellow inmates than those who are assertive or over-assertive. Over-assertiveness, on the other hand, affects more violent behavior within the institution. Unfortunately, violent displays of over-assertive behavior seem to be an unavoidable fact of prison life. Bowker's discussion of this issue focuses on the widely held assumption that one must counter threats

aggressively. This principle and the knowledge of the dangers of prison life serves to escalate the level of violence in the prison, as inmates respond in a "tried and true" but nevertheless violent manner to real or perceived threats.[58] In contrast, the dysfunctional effects of over-assertiveness for the ex-offender on the outside seem obvious. Over-assertiveness is a noted component of other psychological disorders[59] especially when combined with degrees of physical isolation,[60] and an obvious precursor to violent behavior and poor reintegration to family, work, and other social settings.

Few inmates demonstate empathy or concern for others. This characteristic is closely related to the problem of overassertiveness, since low empathy as well as low impulse control appear to be contributing factors to aggressive behavior[61] Research also indicates that empathy is a factor in facilitating the perception and understanding of interpersonal relations training.[62] Although we know that empathy is a key to how one functions interpersonally,[63] some maintain that it is not an easy concept to teach or bring about through conditioning sessions, especially among populations evidencing a significant proportion of individuals diagnosed with antisocial personality disorders.[64] Moreover, developmental psychologists recognize empathy to be a component of ego development[65] and moral development.[66] Acquiring empathic traits from this persective involves increased maturity and significant changes in cognitive structures. Engaged in this study for years, Kohlberg and his

associates at the Center for Moral Education at Harvard University maintain that empathy training should involve the individual's exposure to role-taking situations that force him to assume the perspective of a non-familiar other. At any rate, empathy development may be a key to understanding and treating the communication difficulties observed within this population.

Another interpersonal communication problem apparently affecting the vast majority of prison inmates concerns their unwillingness to discuss personal matters with others. Self-disclosure is related to general mental health[67] since it is relevant to the trust one places in others as well as to one's ability to form intimate relationships, to relieve tension and to receive important feedback.[68] When self-disclosure is lacking to an extreme degree, as it is with persons diagnosed with character disorders, it may also block growth and change.[69] It is important to suggest, however, that it may not be accurate to describe prison inmates as not having the potential for self-disclosure, but rather as lacking the opportunity. Further research is needed to determine whether the limited self-disclosure evidenced by inmates is a generalized personality trait or a situational adaptation to prison life.

One final communication problem concerns the more technical qualities of speech and hearing. During the early 1970s, the American Speech and Hearing Association's Task Force on Speech Pathology/Audiology Service Needs in Prison reported a substantially higher prevalence of speech, hearing and language

disorders among inmates than among the general population.[70] The Task Force asserted that these problems occurred coterminously with poor educational performance, learning disabilities, reduced job opportunities, and general poverty. The technical qualities of speech and hearing seldom receive consideration in the literature pertaining to prison communication styles, however.

Concern for the importance of interpersonal communication is reflected in recent correctional programming.[71] Numerous programming options address such goals as empathy training,[72] self-disclosure,[73] role-playing,[74] interpersonal skills,[75] human relations,[76] , self awareness,[77] etc. The evaluation results of these efforts have been somewhat promising.[78]

Conclusion

In conclusion, the importance of communication patterns and problems in maximum security institutions for males has been recognized at both the aggregate and the individual level. In an applied sense, existing research already suggests, to some extent, that some dysfunctional and dangerous aspects of prison life may be amenable to programmatic intervention. Inmate backgrounds and the realities of institutional life result in inappropriate communication styles that may escalate institutional violence and perpetuate criminal careers upon release. Moreover, the need to "do your own time" may exact a

personal price from those who keep to themselves rather than identify appropriate opportunities for self disclosure, release of tension, and receipt of feedback. This problem is further aggravated by the impact of institutional life on relationships with those outside of the institution. The loss of a significant other may represent for the inmate the cessation of self-disclosure and intimate communication altogether. The result, according to physiologists, psychologists and psychoanalysts, is the loss of a necessary ingredient for the maintenance of a normally established equilibrium.

This is not to suggest, however, that conclusive data pertaining to this problem are currently available. In fact, few of the studies cited above directly address communication per se. Most were studies of other issues (e.g., subcultural adaptations, stability of relationships with family members, psychological effect of imprisonment, etc.) in which implications for communication could be extracted. Moreover, the few studies that directly examine the issue are conceptually too narrow for the nature of the problem. Indeed, adequate study of the issue of interpersonal communication must consider a broad array of related factors. Research that simultaneously addresses current inmate styles in comparison to pre-institutional communication patterns with family, friends, authority figures, etc., for example, was not available. Finally, there appears to be a lack of conclusive empirical validation of the manner in which we "think" inmates are communicating. Many of the

observations cited represent conjecture rather than measurement and fail to provide specific information on the prevalence of a given communication problem or characteristic. The need for further research, programmatic interventions, and evaluations of specific programs is evident.

Footnotes

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This debate essentially questions whether prisonization is the result of the deprivations of prison, as Clemmer, Sykes, and others suggest,or whether, instead, it is the embodiment of a lifestyle that inmates bring or import into the prison. For accounts of the "importation model", the reader is referred to: J. Irwin & D. Cressey,"Thieves, Convicts, and the Inmate Culture," Social Problems, 10 (1962),142-155; C. Wellford, "Factors Associated with the Adoption of the Inmate Code," Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science, 58 (1967), 197-203; and C. Thomas,"Toward a More Inclusive Model of the Inmate Contraculture," Criminology, 8 (1970), 251-262. Moreover, some sources maintain that a model integrating both the deprivation model and the importation model provides the most adequate explanation of the prisonization process.See R. Huff, "Inmate

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